

[In Memoriam: Arif Dirlik \(1940-2017\)](#)

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I am circulating this note, written by Rebecca Karl, in remembrance of her teacher, Arif Dirlik, who passed away on December 1.

I met Arif Dirlik in 1989, the Fall of 1989 to be exact, at a dinner banquet organized in his honor by the History Department at Nanjing University. I had been brought there by a friend, who thought I would enjoy meeting this Professor from Duke University. I had laryngitis and could barely croak. Somehow, Arif and I managed to have a deep conversation that evening, between my hoarseness and the continual demands to down more shots of *baijiu*. I have been involved in a conversation with Arif ever since.

Arif was my PhD advisor at Duke University. He was a marvelous advisor. He taught me many things. Most important, I think, is that he taught me how to be fearlessly radical and radically fearless in my intellectual work, my personal life, and my institutional practice. As many of us know, Arif was not an easy person to get along with sometimes, and he sure did know how to insult folks and hold grudges. But he was a serious thinker and a serious scholar and deeply committed to the radical proposition of possibility. One could forgive him much because of that.

Arif came to the US on a Fulbright from Turkey, to study science at the University of Rochester. He got seduced by revolution, the ongoing Chinese revolution of the 1960s. Not romantically, but as a form of the radicalism of possibility. He moved to the History Department and created his new course of study – still funded by Fulbright! -- with the help of Harry Harootunian and others, whose own modest class backgrounds lent their mentoring a radical openness to unconventionality. I've always enjoyed the conjured image of the Armenian and the Turk drinking some unspeakable spirits in upstate New York, engaging their intellects and actualizing a friendship that could bridge one of the most murderous and still largely disavowed divides in world history. A friendship and intellectual comradeship that endured decades: Arif and Harry, Harry and Arif. And so many other enduring encounters that their created space enabled for the rest of us.

Revolution and History, Arif's first book, seriously challenged the historiography of Chinese history in the United States. It took seriously the Marxist historiographical debates of the 1930s, and it took seriously the attempts of Chinese Marxists of that time to think Chinese history through the Marxist analytic. Because Arif took Marxism seriously in a time when Maoism was beginning its full-scale retreat; because Arif refused to repudiate his radicalism, even when so many China scholars were disavowing their previous full-throated commitments to the Chinese revolution; because Arif had a politics and not merely a position... Arif was not well-received in the inner sanctums of the China Studies field as it was then being reconfigured around the imperatives of anti-radicalism and the desire for the evacuation of politics from scholarship.

Arif's subsequent several books – *The Origins of Chinese Communism* and *Anarchism in the Chinese Revolution* as well as the anthology *Marxism and the Chinese Revolutionary Experience* co-edited

with his long-time friend and ally, Maurice Meisner – can be seen as an extended working out of the logic of the first book: what did radicalism and Marxism have to say to Chinese, and what did Chinese have to say to Marxism and radicalism? Arif’s engagements with these fundamental historical questions possess an intensity and depth that few scholars can claim or realize.

When I met Arif in 1989, he had just published *Origins* and *Anarchism* was in draft manuscript form. He handed me the book and the manuscript at a subsequent meeting after that first hoarse croaky dinner, and he asked me to comment on them when we next got together. I was terrified by the task, and mystified by his lack of hierarchy. I honestly have no idea what I said to him about any of it when I saw him next, but I do know I spent hours reading both books and deciding that I wanted to study with him.

Arif’s subsequent publications were legion. Who can forget his intervention into the early-1990s debates on post-colonialism? Or those on post-modernism? Or third worldism? Or... So many of Arif’s interventions were hugely consequential in the field of intellectual and political work globally, and many were widely read in translations. I will not say that Arif’s works were influential, as I know that he hated the idea of “influence.” As he never ceased to remind us, “influence” is an astrological concept, not an historical one.

Arif’s productivity was scary; his capacity for work was extraordinary. He read voraciously and across many worlds of inquiry; he wrote quickly and surely, with nary a wasted word or a wasted thought; he published constantly in big and small venues, and once the internet became ubiquitous, he published online as well. And yet he always had time to comment thoroughly on other people’s work; to participate in students’ training; to read people’s drafts and theses; to travel to conferences and to teaching stints abroad; to drink and smoke and eat and cook and entertain as if he had nothing better to do than sit around and shoot the breeze. And to be a partner to Roxann Prazniak and a father to his kids and her son.

I will leave it to others to write a proper assessment of his work; I can only manage this brief personal testimony at the moment. I will miss knowing that Arif inhabits this world with his rare political staunchness, his honesty, and his intellectual force. He never got the recognition in the field he ought to have had, but he was recognized across fields that he ultimately cared about more. He was always an anomaly. That is how it should be.

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